

CALAVERAS

INTRODUCTION

In Spanish *calavera* means “skull,” but each year in Mexico around the time of the Day of the Dead, *calavera* takes on a different meaning. At this time *calaveras* refers to imaginary obituaries (obituaries are short notices in newspapers announcing deaths of people known by the readers), which appear on newspaper broadsides all over Mexico. These poetic obituaries humorously criticize well-known individuals who are very much alive.

No one is certain where the custom of writing *calaveras* originated, but the *calavera* resembles the *pasquín* of Spain. The *pasquín* was an anonymous written attack posted publicly. Hernán Cortés may be responsible for introducing the *pasquín* to Central America. Cortés once composed a *pasquín* to respond to some insulting graffiti, which had been written about him.¹

In 1847 Mexico’s first illustrated newspaper appeared under the name of *El Calavera*. Because of the approach of the newspaper, which was highly critical of the existing government, its editors were arrested within a short time and the paper closed.²



Calaveras became especially popular in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The Mexican revolution inspired the writing of many *calaveras* criticizing the revolutionaries under Francisco Madero as well as the deposed government of Porfirio Díaz. In 1910, a *calavera* which was highly critical of Díaz and his cabinet (and governments in general) appeared on a broadside:

*Es la vida pasajera
Y todos pelan el diente,
Aquí está la calavera,
Del que ha sido presidente.
También la de Don Ramón
Y todos sus subalternos
Son como Buenos Gobiernos
Calaveras del montón.*

Life is short
And everyone makes the most of it.
Here is the calavera,
Of the one who was president
Also the one of Don Ramon
And all his subordinates
They’re like good governments
Calaveras in a heap³

¹ Robert V. Childs and Patricia B. Altman. Vive Tu Recuerdo: Living Traditions in Mexican Days of the Dead (California: University of California, 1982), p. 52.

² Ibid, p. 54

³ Anonymous *calavera* in “Calaveras del montón,” Número 1, as it appears in Posada: El artista que retrató a una época by Antonio Rodríguez (México: Editorial Domes, 1977), p. 199.

DIRECTIONS FOR THIS SECTION

Throughout this section there will be reading materials followed by questions or an activity. Read and discuss the questions with each other or write out your responses to the questions in order to clarify your ideas. You may wish to keep a *calavera* journal or diary with analyses of the *calaveras* poems and you might wish to write your own *calaveras* there as well.

CALAVERAS IN A COMMON GRAVE

Calaveras are usually considered “popular” literature, that is, literature which is easily understood and appreciated by the majority of people and which deals with topics of tangible, immediate concern. Because of their popular nature, calaveras are very effective, far-reaching means of bringing about moral and political reform. Moreover, they provide a useful reflection of the feelings of ordinary people at the time they are written.



Kind Katharine

In the North American colonies of the 18th century, the writings of individuals like Benjamin Franklin served a purpose similar to that of the *calavera*. Under the assumed name of Poor Richard, Franklin made pointed commentary in his Almanack about the society around him.

Franklin also used writing to make clear his opinions about women. What follows is a piece from Poor Richard's Almanack just as it appeared at the time (1730's – 1780's). Read it very carefully and then try to translate it into modern English in the space provided beside the poem. As you read, try to determine Franklin's attitude towards women. (In several places you will find it helpful to substitute a letter “s” for the letter “f.”)

Kind Katherine to her husband kifs'd thefe words,
' Mine own fweet *Will*, how dearly I love thee!
If true (quoth Will) the World no fuch affords.
And that its true I durft his warrant be;
For ne'er heard I of Woman good or ill,
But always loved beft, her own fweet Will.⁴

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What two meanings does the word “Will” have in this poem?
2. What does Will think Katherine really means when she says, “Mine own fweet Will, how dearly I love thee!”?
3. What does Will think about women in general? Is this what Benjamin Franklin thinks as well? Why or why not? Do you find it insulting?

⁴ As it appears in Walter Blair and Hamlin Hill, *America's Humor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 65.



Marcialita

Read the following Mexican *calavera* it has been translated into English for you.

*Marcialita la casera
Gestaba tanta flojera,
Que por no ocuparse en nada
Se convirtió en calavera.⁵*

Marcialita the housekeeper
Expanded so much lack of energy,
That by not doing anything
She turned into a *calavera*.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What is the meaning of the calavera in this poem?
2. What is the author saying about Marcialita?
3. How do you feel about Marcialita? Do you think the author of the poem feels this way about all women? Why or why not? Do you find this poem insulting?

⁵ Antonio Rodriguez, *Posada: El artista que retrató a una época* (México: Editorial Domes, 1977), p. 177.



CALAVERAS AND SATIRE

Calaveras are a form of satire. A North American writer, M.H. Abrams, defines satire as:

The literary act of diminishing a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking towards it attitudes of amusement, contempt, or scorn.⁶

Does this definition fit what you already know about *calaveras*? Think about Marcialita. Did that *calavera* make you think of her with “amusement, contempt, or scorn”? Was it the intention of the author that *calavera* to make Marcialita look “ridiculous”?

Simply criticizing something or someone not considered satire. Pretend that the author of the *calavera* about Marcialita wrote this instead:

Marcialita the housekeeper was lazy
and now she’s just a skull.

What is the difference between the two versions? Look again at the definition of satire given by Abrams. According to that definition, would this new version be considered satire? Why or why not? What is needed in addition to criticism for a poem to be considered satire?

We know that satire must be humorous and must criticize the subject in some way. Nevertheless, saying “so-and-so looks like a flamingo” is not satire even though the speaker is criticizing so-and-so by making a humorous connection between so-and-so and a flamingo. Read what Abrams added to his definition of satire. As you read, think of at least two reasons why “so-and-so looks like a flamingo” is not satire.

Satire has usually been justified by those who practice it as a corrective of human vice and folly. As such, its claim has been to ridicule the failing rather than the individual, and to limit its ridicule to corrigible faults, excluding those for which a man is not responsible.⁷

⁶ M.H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1961), p. 85.

⁷ Ibid.

CALAVERAS WE HAVE KNOWN

Satire is prevalent in North American and British literature. Jonathan Swift and Mark Twain are well-known satirists. You may already be familiar with some of their work. Swift's Gulliver's Travels is a thinly disguised satire of the government and religious leaders of his time. Mark Twain's A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court satirizes the nostalgia of his contemporaries for the England of King Arthur.

Many writers have used satire on occasion to make a point. The following poem is about Buffalo Bill, a man of many interests. He rode with the Pony Express, fought for the Union in the North American Civil War, and scouted for the Cavalry. He claimed to have killed 4,280 buffalo. In the late 1800's he became an actor and eventually created his Wild West Show, a rodeo extravaganza.



Buffalo Bill

Read E.E. Cummings' poem about Buffalo Bill and then respond to the questions that follow.

Buffalo Bill's

defunct

who used to

ride a watersmooth-silver

stallion

and break onetwothreefour pigeonsjustlikethat

Jesus

he was a handsome man

and what i want to know is

how do you like your blueeyed boy

Mister Death.⁸

Note to the Reader: Cummings' use of the word 'Jesus' in his Buffalo Bill poem may be perceived as offensive to some readers. However, it has not been omitted here since such omission would deter from the significance of the poem and would obviously change Cumming's specific intentions in including the word.

⁸ E.E. Cummings, "Buffalo Bill" in Exploring Life through Literature. Edmund James Farrell et al, eds. (Dallas: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1973). p. 204

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What details about Buffalo Bill's appearance does Cummings choose to include in his poem? List them.
2. What effect do these choices have? Do you think these details are important? How do they affect how you feel about Buffalo Bill?
3. What details about Buffalo Bill's abilities are included in the poem? According to the poem is Buffalo Bill remarkable? Why or why not?
4. Based on what you know about *calaveras*, in what ways do you think this poem resembles a *calavera*? How does it differ?
5. Is this a satirical poem? Why or why not?

A Tyrant

The following poem was written by the British writer W.H. Auden. He titled it "Epitaph on a Tyrant." An epitaph is an inscription on a tombstone that says something about the person buried there. Read the poem and answer the questions following it.



Perfection, of a kind, was what he was after,
And the poetry he invented was easy to understand;
He knew human folly like the back of his hand,
And was greatly interested in armies and fleets;
When he laughed, respectable senators burst with laughter,
And when he cried the little children died in the streets.⁹

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What do you think Auden means when he writes that when the tyrant "cried the little children died in the streets"?
2. What words can you think of to describe this tyrant? (Include some of the words Auden uses if you wish but add your own.) Do you like or dislike him? Does Auden like or dislike him?
3. What kind of perfection was the tyrant looking for?
4. Is this satire? Why or why not?

⁹ W.H. Auden, "Epitaph on a Tyrant" from Exploring Life through Literature. Edmund James Farrell et al. eds. (Dallas: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1973). p. 240



CALAVERAS ON THE JOB

Many *calaveras* were written about the individuals in a given profession. Butchers, teachers, priests, housekeepers, artists, mail carriers, and shopkeepers were all satirized by writers of *calaveras*. The following *calavera* is about barbers.

Barbero del Barrio

*Muchas prodigios hiciste
Con el pelo y con la barba,
Por eso no se te escarba
Las losa en que sucumbiste:
Algunas cortadas diste
A la gente pasajera,
Mas ahora por tu tontera
Yaces dentro una mortaja,
Con tijeras y navaja
Para tuzar calaveras.¹⁰*

Neighborhood Barber

You performed many miracles
With beards and hair,
So you don't care that
You're underground:
You gave some cuts
To people passing by,
And now for your stupidity
You're wrapped in a shroud,
With a razor and some scissors
To trim *calaveras*.

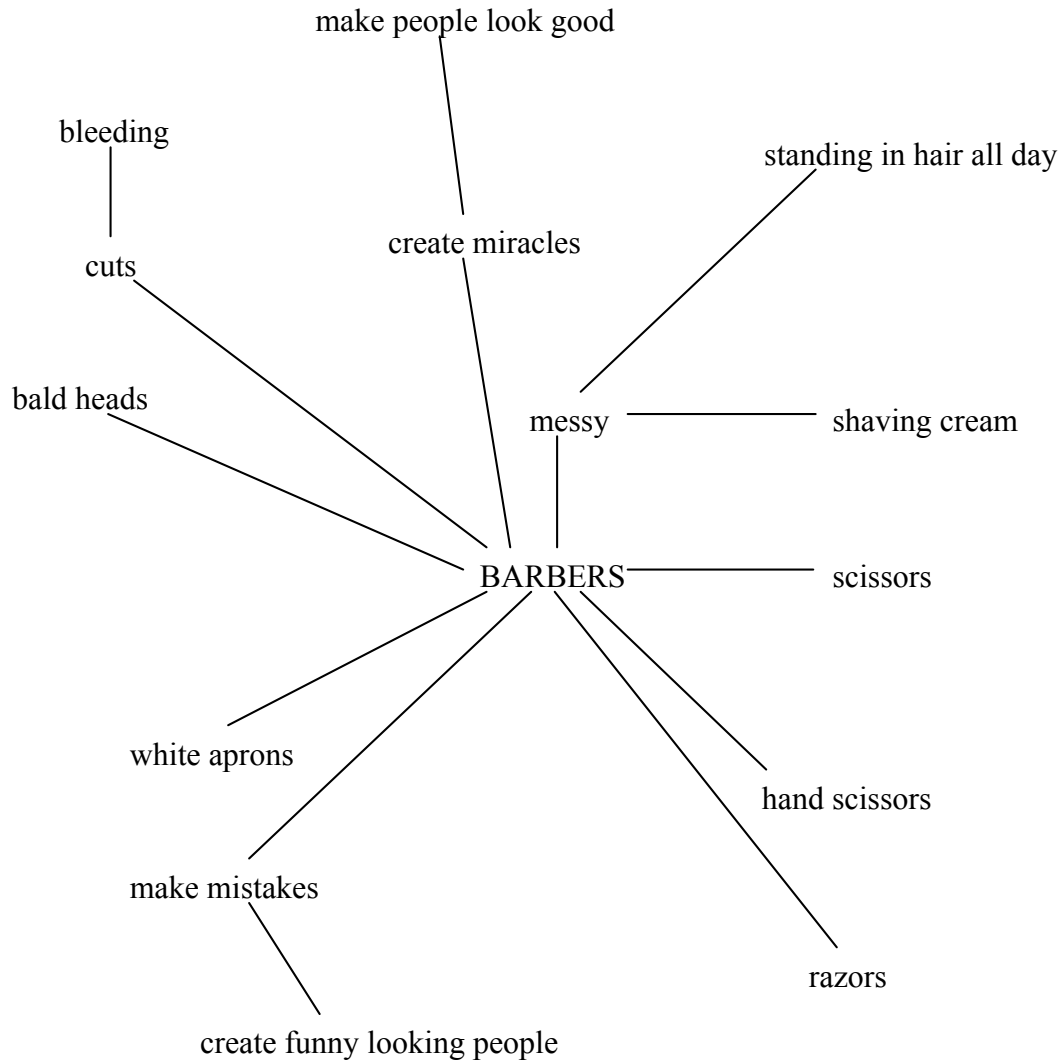
DIRECTIONS: What professions interest you? Do you have any idea what kind of a profession you would like to pursue? Pick a profession for yourself. Then try to imagine what characteristics of that profession are amusing. If you were a *calavera* writer how could you make fun of the people in your chosen profession? Write down your ideas as you think about this. You might want to record your ideas in the following chart. (Only fill out the chart if you think it will help you.)

Writing a *Calavera*

1. Chosen profession:
2. What do people in this profession do?
3. What are people in this profession like? Do they make a great deal of money? Are they respected? How do they feel about themselves? Why are they in this profession?
4. What could you criticize about this profession?
5. What is amusing about this profession and the people in it?

¹⁰ Anonymous *calavera* in Antonio Rodriguez's *Posada: El artista que retrató a una época* (México: Editorial Domes, 1978). p. 202.

If you are still having trouble with this exercise try writing the name of your profession on a piece of paper. Then write down anything that comes to your mind about the profession. Consider the following example that the author of the *calavera* about barbers might have used.



When you are ready and you feel like you've brought out all your thoughts on the topic, write a *calavera* making fun of your profession. To do this, simply choose the ideas that were most interesting and arrange them in some way that is pleasing to you and makes sense to you. Keep in mind that a *calavera* is a mock obituary and this it is satirical.



CALAVERAS AND IRONY



Re-read the *calavera* about the barber. Why is this *calavera* funny? Is it because the barber dies like everyone else or is there more to it than that?

One of the reasons you might find the *calavera* funny is that it is ironic. Many *calaveras* include irony. Very simply, irony is the unexpected found in contradictions. Irony can take many forms. Verbal irony is the difference between what a person says and what he or she really means. For example, if a person says, “This day is turning out to be one of the top ten” on a day when every conceivable catastrophe has occurred, he or she is using irony and what he or she said is ironic. This form of irony is often called sarcasm.

Another form of irony, which is what was used in *calavera* about the barber, is dramatic irony. In this type of irony, what happens to an individual is the opposite of what she or he expected and/or of what the reader expected. For example, the barber is depicted as feeling pretty good about himself. He has even performed some minor miracles on people’s hair. Now he’s in the grave and he doesn’t mind too much. He has his scissors and his razor and he’s all ready to continue doing what he has always done. The problem is the only potential customers are other skeletons and skeletons don’t have any hair. This is ironic because it is not what we or the barber anticipated.

There are other forms of irony. Understatement is quite common in satirical works. Understatement involves attributing less importance or having little reaction to something that deserves more. Abrams uses the example of Mark Twain to clarify the characteristics of this type of irony. Abrams writes that at one point in his life Twain commented, “The reports of my death are greatly exaggerated.” Obviously if Twain was alive to make that comment he wasn’t dead, and so to say that the rumor was just an exaggeration is understatement and funny. It’s a remark that we do not expect from someone who was mistakenly thought dead because it is too calm.

If you are interested in finding out more about irony, consult Abrams’ book or another reference book on literary terms. Also, practice what you’ve learned by doing the following activity.

Making it Ironic

DIRECTIONS: What follows are six situations and statements. Read through each one and then add to it or put it in a context that makes it ironic. Review the types of irony described above for ideas if you need help getting started.

1. A man looks out the window and sees that the sun is shining. He puts on a short sleeve shirt and shorts. He goes outside. Everyone is wearing coats and heavy clothes. They look hot and uncomfortable. The man laughs and thinks how stupid they are.

Later that day the man is on his way home from work. It starts to snow. He is freezing cold. He starts to run. People on the street laugh as he runs by because he looks so foolish.

2. “You really a considerate person,” she said.

A limousine drove down the street. The driver watched as the man in the back, who was a millionaire, drank champagne and ate caviar. Suddenly, the man asked the driver to pull over so she did. The man got out of the car and walked over to a homeless person sitting in the corner. He reached into his pocket and threw the homeless person a quarter. Then he got back in the limousine and began to eat again. The driver looked in the rear view mirror as she pulled away. “You really are a considerate person,” she said.

3. This really is a big place you have here,” he said.
4. He had saved all his money for three years. Finally he was ready to go to the store and buy what he had always wanted.
5. It was going to be a great day. She had just picked up her car from the repair shop, her paycheck would be waiting for her when she got home, the bank was open late tonight, and she only had to work a half day today. Tomorrow, first thing in the morning, she was flying to California for a week on the beach. Nothing could go wrong.
6. “I do not talk about other people behind their backs. I think it’s rude to make fun of people when they can’t be there to defend themselves.”

Making a Point

Read the following calavera and then try to figure out why it is ironic. Do you agree with this calavera? Why or why not?

*El Pontífice romano,
Y todos los concejales,
Y el jefe de la Nación
En la tumba son iguales.
Calaveras del montón.*

The Holy Roman Pope
And all the council people,
And the leader of the Nation
In the tomb they’re all equal.
Skeletons in a pile.¹¹



¹¹ Anonymous calavera in Antonio Rodríguez’s *Posada: El artista que retrató a una época* (México: Editorial Domes, 1978). p. 26.